

9-7-1849

Letter from Thomas Coke Wright to James B. Finley

Thomas Coke Wright

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If your health would permit I will thank you to write to me; though, my letters cannot be interesting to you yet, as Mr. Clay said in his speech "I claim some credit for my good intentions!"

How are you & family as it regards health? When did you hear from Dr. Jefft? Has he recovered his health? Is your book in press & when may it be expected to be published. It seems to me it would add much to its interest if there were a sequel part containing an account of the ravages of the pestilence in the institution and the horrible scenes which occurred and if not improper the names of the victims. As to sending me specimen sheets as I mentioned it is not necessary as I shall see the whole work in due time. You did not inform me the name of the person to whom you sold the copy right. Was it our mutual friend Henry Howe.

Wishing you a speedy restoration to health and that the evening of your life may be as pleasant as the vigor of your manhood has been laborious & useful to your fellow mortals.

I remain with sincere esteem

Respectfully your fellow citizen

Thos. Coke Wright

Thos. Coke Wright

Sept 4/9

Xenia Oh Sept: 7th 1849 Sunday.
Dear Sir

I believe you saw me two letters, or perhaps I should say would see one two letters were mine worth answering. My last to you was dated June 25th and sent by the son of our Sheriff when R. B. Sides was taken to the Penitentiary. On the 21st of June I received a note from Dr. Jefft, in answer to one I had sent him, in which he stated his health was bad - that if he had my account of the pestilence then he might use a portion of it, or should it come within 5 or 6 days, or in a longer time should he be sick, otherwise he did not know how much he could make use of it. On the 23rd I gave it to D. W. Bennett of the Gibson Hotel who went off in a hurry and forgot it. Mr. Fairchild sent down for me in a day or so after to Mr. Darby Bookseller who sent it to the office of the Methodist Book Concern. I have never heard one word from it since. I supposed the cholera would in all likelihood delay the publication of your work, even if Dr. Jefft's health permitted him to attend to it which from what he said in his note I considered doubtful. But the pestilence has ceased its ravages in the city & business has resumed its course and I suppose the book is going on & will soon be completed. In the mean time I have some anxiety to know whether any use was made of what I sent down, and if so, what portion of it. I think I requested the Doctor to inform me of that. I would like to have had a few loose sheets sent me by mail as the book was being struck off that I might see a specimen of it. I have received such before now both from Cincinnati and New York. I desired the manuscript preserved for me if it could be done conveniently as I might make use of some portions of it not inserted in the book as I suppose very little of it will be used if any, from what Dr. Jefft said in his note.

It is only recently that I have learned where you are. I thought you were in the neighborhood of Germantown and I believe I have sent you newspapers to that Post office, and had I known certainly where you were should have sent more than I did.

Our usually healthy town has been much affected this season. "The pestilence that walketh in darkness and destroyeth at noon day" has been in our midst. So has the plague which seems to have gone hand in hand with it. The first fatal case of cholera near Xenia was on the 3rd of July. Old Mr. Cline who had kept Union meeting house for many years, residing on the very spot where your brother John once lived. She was the mother of the present wife of the Rev. John Lewis Smith, of the Indiana circuit. Her son John had been to Dayton to have an operation performed on his eyes being nearly blind, inhaled the pestilence, came home and died in a few hours. The people believed the disease was contagious and consequently a dreadful panic spread through the neighborhood like wild fire. Only one young man - The O'Connell, a great grandson of William Owens Sr. had the resolution to remain with John Cline to the last. And when the hearse came from Xenia only two more men besides Ira, who ventured to assist in putting the corpse in the coffin.

To wit, Samuel I Owens & Tommy Davis. Just as they were starting to the grave the Old Lady was taken and called on some of them to come and stay with her. Margaret Owens did so and remained with her to the last. She had the disease in the most exquisitely malignant manner and died in 6 hours. There being no one present besides the Doctor but her two surviving children and Owens. She came to town for a coffin and the two surviving Clines, Margaret & David shut up the house & fled leaving the corpse alone. The power was increased by the sudden & terrible death of Mr C and "consternation turned the good man pale".

The young Clines fled to Tommy Davis's living where old Pa Pelham, formerly did, a beautiful example of the triumph of benevolence over fear ensued. Mr Davis, Caroline Pelham as was, has a large family of children some of whom were sick. She stood in the door, saw the Clines coming from the house of pestilence and death. She fully expected if they came in herself & family would all be swept off perhaps in a few hours. Her feelings of terror were indescribable. Margaret called out as she approached, "O Mr Davis my poor Mother is dead & we want some one to go & bury her". Come in was the reply & we will do the best we can for you. Well, strong enough, they were hospitably received & kindly treated, both of them had the Cholera & both recovered and all the Davis family escaped. The man who owned the grave yard where John was buried became so alarmed that he would not consent that the Mother should be buried there and a solitary grave was dug on the meeting house lot; when the young one who dug it saw the hearse approaching, they threw down their spades & ran in if death on the pale horse was after them. There was no one to bury the old lady but the same little squad that buried John. Fortunately, for old Union the pestilence spread no further there.

In anticipation of the pestilence the corporate authorities of Kenia commenced operations having all the mud brought in by waggons & scraped up in piles while the streets were wet and hauled away, the gutters all cleaned out, drunken places filled up & garbage & rubbish of bushes of unlooked pine distributed. The streets were smooth & hard. In fact Kenia was made the cleanest town I ever saw. On the 11th of July the first fatal case occurred in Kenia in a large family 8 of whom died. It put a stop to all improvements, an unusual number of buildings were on hand, spread a gloom over the place and caused the people "to walk thoughtfully on the solemn silent shores of that vast Ocean they might sail so soon". A very few left at the commencement. But the citizens generally stood at home and attended and nursed the sick with diligence, kindness and sympathy worthy of all praise. Our physicians did their duty nobly though worn down with hard service 4 of them were sick themselves and some near dying. Though it was their first practice with Cholera cases they were quite successful curing an average 2 out of 3 cases. The consequence of all this was that probably not more than 1/4 the number died which otherwise would. I remember there was one time when, with 6 bakeries not a single loaf of bread could be obtained.

For a number of years past my general health has been excellent - rarely, having, so much as a common cold, sore throat, or head ache. I had not missed a single morning winter or summer for going on 3 years that I did not take a cold bath, immediately on rising from bed followed by a thorough rubbing of the skin with coarse towels. I did not expect to be sick with any thing. But notwithstanding my good health & hygienic habits

I did get sick on the 21st of July with the flux and desperately & awfully sick I was. I was confined to bed about a week but have never been the man I was or felt like being well again until last Saturday, having, for 6 weeks done no steady writing in my office. I am of opinion that the common disease to which we are liable is more dangerous in time of Cholera than at any other time. There is less resolution & stamina to enable one to bear up against it. Suppose one has the flux & is up and down all night like I was. In one sense, it is like being on the platform of the gallows, with the rope round one's neck & the cap drawn over his eyes. We hope his friends have obtained a reprieve from the governor but dreads every moment to feel the trap door falling from under one viz, rice water discharges and cramps.

I was pleased to see your very satisfactory letter in the Christian Advocate. For myself I was satisfied from the first you had good and sufficient reasons for leaving Columbus and so I told my friends. I was informed by a young man directly from Columbus that you ran away the first man when that Cholera broke out in the Penitentiary. I did not believe a word of your having left though fear. I have known something of the Finley family more than 36 years and know they are not of a running breed in times of danger being, possessed of physical courage to face danger of any sort nor would any of them desert a post where moral or religious duty called them. Still the report afforded some an opportunity to make remarks. I heard one remark "So he is as afraid of death as any one else" &c &c. The Editor of the South light made a short editorial notice of it. Beginning, if I remember aright, with "When the Cholera broke out in the Penitentiary the Moral instructor ran away &c I sent you a paper containing it but not knowing when you were, desisted. It was, when Mr Brooks's letter appeared your friend Faithfull and true, Samuel I Owens went with the paper containing it and insisted on his publishing a contradiction which he did in a short editorial notice. It was not done in a manner to please Samuel as he told me he would as soon he had not said anything about it. This contradiction was headed "Didn't run". Your letter will satisfy every candid mind and ought to make the persons who put the report in circulation ashamed of themselves if they had any of that commodity left. With all your old friends as true as Napoleon's old guard there needed no letter - they had known you too long & too well to believe you had left from any motives like fear. It would have been contrary to the character of your whole life and conduct.

I sincerely regret the bad state of your health & do sincerely hope that repose which you so much require and good nursing with your family will recruit you completely. I hope so from your having been originally possessed of a strong frame & sound constitution and that you have stamina enough left to build up. Though, it is a fact you have gone through many hardships & exposures to cold and wet - in fact you have endured privations & suffered enough to tell a redoubt of some of "the men of yesterday" as I truly believe and were your health restored could endure enough to tell some of them yet.